

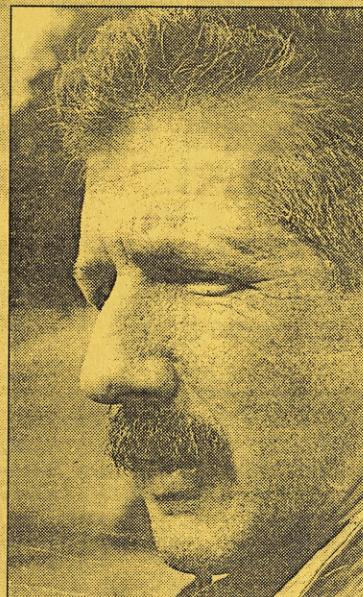
Warren Sonbert, who was the most gracefully absolute of American avant-garde filmmakers, died May 31 at age 47 of complications following AIDS. The rules of his filmmaking game, fully in place by the time he'd completed *Carriage Trade* in 1971, were stringent and economical but they gave him the room he needed. His official oeuvre includes 15 films, almost all of them touched with greatness. And his last film, *Short Fuse*, contains one of the most sublime (in the original sense of evoking beauty and terror) sequences in all cinema.

This is roughly how Warren made his films: He carried his 16mm silent Bolex camera into the world, recording sights that appealed to him and some that disturbed him. A master cinematographer, he produced images that were at once sensuous and abstract. He opened his lens to nature and culture, public spectacles and intimate exchanges. His eye was attuned to movement—a train hurtling across a bridge; a bear, primordial and strangely fragile, surfacing straight up out of the water; a cat stretching in the sun; an aerialist climbing the high wire. He found analogies for his filmmaking in the speed and daring of dancers and acrobats, in the precision of a potter at

his wheel, in the case of someone setting dishes on a table.

In his editing room, he treated these images, not as diary, but as found footage. "The job of editing," he once wrote, "which distinguishes film from theater or simple (minded) photography, is to balance a series of ambiguities in a tension filled framework." And on another occasion: "The films are never about anything or about nothing." Or as his friend, film scholar Paul Arthur wrote: "They should be viewed not as precious chamber works but as condensed, elusive epics whose fragmented flow harbors the traces of protracted physical journeys, massive social upheavals, the continuities and collusions of distant cultural rituals."

Practically speaking, Warren violated all the



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rules of professional editing. First off, he never made a work print. He projected his original footage several times, making notes about individual shots and potential relationships. Then he went to work on it, cutting and splicing, using only the basic tools—a pair of rewinds and a viewer. One would watch in horror as Warren wandered over to his editing table, dribbling crumbs from his breakfast bagel. And yet, the films that emerged were dazzlingly clean and precise.

"You must mention that Warren always had the best gossip," says Lynne Tillman. He did. And prodigious social skills. Warren probably had more gigs in more places than any other independent filmmaker. There's no way to sort out whether he traveled to make films or made films to travel, but he spent a good deal of time circumnavigating the globe,

showing the film he'd just completed while accumulating material for the next.

Warren had a remarkable knowledge of film history. His devotion wasn't limited to the avant-garde. Hitchcock and Cukor influenced his aesthetic as much as Stan Brakhage. And he had a phenomenal memory for visual images. He could pull out a visual trope and show you how it played through a filmmaker's entire oeuvre. He took as much pleasure in music as in film. He adored opera and ballet. His passion for melodrama was so profound that I think he had no choice but to keep it at arm's length in his own work.

Warren's films don't lend themselves easily to memory—perhaps because they are as much about loss as accumulation. Like dreams, they tend to blur into one another, impelled by their internal logic of displacement and condensation. After Warren died, I was reminded of a sequence, a singularly awkward sequence in *Divided Loyalties*, of people clustered in a cemetery around a newly dug grave. Warren had filmed his mother's funeral. Would that he had been here to film his own.

—A.T.

There will be a memorial on June 28 at 11 a.m. in the Walter Reade Theater.